

# A Theory Of Personal Language And Implications For *Logos* Theology

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In this article, I explore the Christian doctrine of the *Logos* in relation to Polanyi's theory of language, which has implications both for the status of words and for their role *vis a vis* the speaker.<sup>1</sup> Polanyi argues that all knowledge is *personal* knowledge and, by the same logic, that the language in which we express our knowledge is *personal* language, since there is an element of personal judgement in our choice and use of words, which reflect in themselves something of the character of the knower as well as something of the reality of the known. Though language is public and has a social character, words are living and relational and help to bridge the gap between subjectivity and objectivity.

Language can be thought of in different ways. The Hebrews thought of the word as something with a life of its own, but remaining part of its author and able to perform the author's intentions. This thought lies behind the Hebrew doctrine of the Word of God and of creation. When God says, "Let there be!" (Genesis 1), his Word is thought of as going forth into the world to accomplish his will. (Isaiah 55:11) In Christian tradition, God and his Word are inseparable. God's Word is eternally generated by him, and when the Word becomes incarnate, it remains what God is antecedently in his eternal Being. This unitary view is undermined by dualistic thinking, which tends to separate reality from its rational content and to treat thought and reality, sign and thing signified, as related indirectly, even arbitrarily.<sup>2</sup> Even the Western Church has tended to think of God, not as communicating himself in his own intelligible internal relations, but indirectly and externally.

Dualistic thinking tends to polarize the subjective and objective elements in knowing and this has affected Christian thought in two ways. One stream identifies the Word of God with his indwelling Spirit, the Spirit of truth that illuminates the soul, like the inner light of the Quakers. The problem with such a view is that the "inner light" is indistinguishable from the subjective structures of the self-conscious self. The other stream, which equates truth with a fixed, objective corpus of "revealed" propositions, intellectualizes religious faith and encourages a fundamentalist outlook.

In order to avoid these consequences of dualistic thinking, revelation has to be set within the framework of a personalist metaphysic and understood in terms of a dynamic such as Polanyi proposes in his theory of personal knowledge. "Revelation" can then be seen to result from the fruitful interaction of subject and object. Subjectively, we interpret God's speaking to us integratively and creatively through the exercise of our own tacit powers. But objectively, God's Word confronts us and calls us to interpret our experience in the light of the *Logos* principle, that structures all reality.<sup>2</sup> Even "natural" knowledge of God is, for the Christian, set within the framework of the Christian revelation and interpreted in the light of the "rationality" provided by the "Word made flesh" (Jn 1:14).

This understanding of the structure of revelation corresponds to Polanyi's analysis of the structure of knowing, which functions on two logical levels. Polanyi sees all knowing as taking place within a framework of

commitment, which involves working with a rational scheme appropriate to subject matter. He draws attention to the fact that presuppositions are a matter of personal judgment for which we, in the end, take responsibility by deciding whether the rational scheme we adopt is appropriate to our experience. Traditionally, Christianity holds that the *Logos* principle provides the only appropriate rational scheme for interpreting a personal universe. In an ultimate sense, our understanding of nature and history comes from working within this fiduciary framework provided by the *Logos* of God, which itself derives ultimately from the rationality that structures God in his own internal relations.

This idea seems alien and perhaps naive to many people, largely due to the influence of science. Science's main concern is to explain the particular in terms of the general and scientists hope eventually to arrive at a theoretical view of the universe, by reducing it to a set of ultimate symbols and relations at the highest possible level of logical unity. Such a formulation will, it is thought, establish the relations that obtain between all the forces and elements that structure the physical universe. But it will radically simplify basic concepts and relations and reduce them to terms of mathematics. Theology is interested in another kind of unitary thinking, concerned, not with formulating the basic structures of physical reality, but with understanding the inner meaning of existence as a whole. Einstein's famous  $E=mc^2$  is about the real world, but it tells us nothing about the world of persons or the meaning of life. For this, a different kind of rationality has to be invoked. To borrow a phrase from T.F. Torrance, we need *Logos* rationality rather than "number" rationality to understand the meaning of existence. We need an interpretive framework which is apposite to the total story of creation, and for Christians, the incarnate "Word" of God provides the conceptual model to shape their thoughts and provide the logic needed to make sense of experience.

It is central to Polanyi's theory of knowledge that our critical faculty needs to operate within a framework of beliefs that can provide a model or a standard against which to judge experience. Language itself is a kind of framework within which we do our thinking. Even a single word can function as a model and influence thought. For example, the word "machine" provided Newton with a conceptual model and a set of basic presuppositions that governed the way he thought about the universe. In Polanyian terms, his mind was "at home" in this model. In the same way, the Christian mind is "at home" in, and allows its thinking to be governed by, the model provided by "the Word made flesh." Even a metaphor or a story can function as an "extended word," in the sense that it constitutes a unitary experience which can provide a model or world view. The essence of a story is achieved by reading it whole, dwelling in it and letting it speak. Concepts can be quite complex patterns of meaning. The unit of linguistic meaning is not the word but the message it conveys and the art of reading sense into words is to recognize that they have both particular application and universal significance.

For Christians, the pattern of meaning that constitutes the Christ event provides an interpretative key to the cosmos. As God's "Word," Christ has strict historical particularity, but his life, death and resurrection also have universal meaning and provide an interpretative framework within which to think about all experience. Generality without particularity would compress all meaning into a single formula and deprive it of content. Particularity without generality would deprive the particular of any meaningful application beyond itself. Personal names function in this way. But the divine *Logos* is understood to be a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a coincidence of particularity and universality, a *particular* embodiment of reality that also functions as a principle of rationality that makes sense of all experience. *Logos* rationality fully affirms both form and content. It is the kind of *personal* rationality that unites the world of the "many" and reveals, in an ultimate sense, its unitary meaning. Its universality in no way diminishes its particularity, nor does its particularity limit its universal application. Because of this, Christians are able to speak of the incarnate "Word" both as the universal, *cosmic* Christ and as the particular, historical Jesus. The latter is thought of as united with God incarnate in an inner "I-Thou" relation, sharing the same "personal space." Only a philosophy

that relates opposites across levels in polar complementarity can make sense of such a claim, which is of the essence of the doctrine of incarnation.

In learning to speak, we commit ourselves to a particular view of the world. But this does not prevent us from exercising our power to judge whether the words we use are apposite to the reality we seek to express. Polanyi argues that we need to acknowledge the competence of our own faculties to control the range of meaning that can be given to a term and be ready to revise our conclusions in the light of new evidence. A proper use of language is part of the commitment we have to our vision of reality, which is evidenced, Polanyi suggests, by our sense of fitness to judge that our words express the reality of which we wish to speak (*Personal Knowledge* 113 [hereafter *PK*]). When language is apposite, it is an aid to conceptual organization and helps us in our quest for deeper insights. Words are universals and every word we use is a theory about the nature of reality. As symbols, words are principles which regulate the formation of our concepts, but they also take on meaning from the conceptions we form in the course of our contact with reality. Conceptual decisions involve the recognition of alternative part-whole relations. Choice of language is controlled in a primary sense by our experience of the subject matter, but we may also see the subject matter in ways suggested by the terms we are given. There is always an element of dialectic in our use, or creation of, language.

On Polanyi's view, words have not only referential or denotative power; they also have anticipatory powers which give them heuristic value. Language puts us in touch with its subject matter and aids us in making new discoveries as well as in contemplating and understanding particular realities. That to which language points is the real world, which we believe will yet reveal itself in unexpected ways. According to Polanyi, it is enduring meaning (significant pattern) that brings us into contact with reality. Our power to recognize things as real depends on a combination of form and content, of definition and substance. Polanyi's conception of reality is of something essentially indeterminate, whose continued presence is rich in unexpected possibilities for the future. He writes,

When we believe that we have truly designated something real, we expect that it may yet manifest its effectiveness in an indefinite and perhaps wholly unexpected manner. This intention comprises a range of properties which only future discoveries may reveal--confirming thereby the rightness of the conception conveyed by our term (*PK* 116).

Such a view of reality suggests that persons are the most real beings in the created order and that God, our uncreated Source and Goal, is that ultimate personal "Reality", whose meaning is inexhaustibly reflected in and through his "Word." In the rest of this article I consider whether Polanyi's theory of language may illuminate in some way the nature of the relationship between "the Word of God" and those who dwell within it and seek to use it as an interpretative key.

According to Polanyi, the self, the reality of which it speaks and its means of self-expression form an irreducible triad in which meaning is shaped by the mind as reality actively discloses itself. The beholder then articulates his experience in words. Perceptual, conceptual and imaginative elements are at work in this threefold process of perceiving, understanding and communicating. A word or symbol can function as a kind of "map" which helps us find our way about by reorganizing our conception of the area it represents (*PK* 117). The use of different words can illuminate our conception of a particular state of affairs and allow different or new inferences to be drawn.

We use words to communicate what we want to say, but meaning does not inhere in the word, but in the reality designated. Words viewed as objects are meaningless sounds, which become meaningful only when we look through them to the reality or state of affairs they denote. Knowledge starts as an unaccountable apprehension of a meaningful pattern in reality. Meaning is inseparable from its embodiment. For example, a play or a symphony *is* its own meaning in virtue of its expression. It can be viewed, in a sense, as an elaborate “word”--a means of saying something that cannot be taken apart. One cannot say what is the meaning of a Shakespeare sonnet or a Bach Cantata, except by *dwelling* in it and reciting or performing it. The meaning requires for its expression the whole work of art. In the same way, a person indivisibly embodies his or her own meaning.

Language functions tacitly and instrumentally like spectacles and provides a particular perspective on the world. Words are conceptual representatives of reality, but their relation to reality is indirect rather than an exact model. Their meaning is “read” by the joint operation of sense, reason and imagination and they function, sometimes more as models, sometimes more as metaphors, depending on the nature of the reality to be described. We can be helped or hindered by the terms which language offers us. Language arises as we grope for words in the process of making conceptual decisions about the nature of things and how to act towards them. We entrust the life and guidance of our thoughts to our conceptions because we believe they derive their rationality from contact with some aspect of reality. We even allow our actions to be guided by them, though we believe we too have direct contact with reality (*PK* 106).

Many modern writers regard words as conventions. This idea originated in the tradition of nominalism which teaches that general terms are merely names designating certain similar collections of objects.<sup>3</sup> This theory treats language as an arbitrary human creation, using words as conventions whose meanings derive from the persons who invent them rather than from the reality to which they refer (see note 2). Nominalism severs the bond between thought and its subject matter, between meaning and reality, between subjectivity and objectivity. It establishes a merely external relationship between words and that to which they refer.<sup>4</sup> Such a theory cannot, as Polanyi points out, account adequately for the power exercised by words over our thought or for the way the same term can mean something different in different contexts. The fact that words change their meaning does not justify treating them merely as conventions. Such logic is comparable to the idea that scientific theories are merely convenient ways of viewing the data, but tell us nothing about real relations. The tendency to treat the theoretical dimension as purely subjective and not derivable from empirical data goes with distrust of metaphysics and reluctance to accredit the term “reality” with meaning. Words change their meaning, not because they are empty conventions, but because we make fresh discoveries about the real world through our contact with it.

Concepts constitute the subjective pole of the meaning-reality relation, and the reality itself is the objective pole. Language sharpens our awareness of reality and helps to formalize experience, but each step towards stricter formalization involves a progressive sacrifice of content and a decrease in the power of language to evoke experience of reality. This is why Polanyi insists that a certain degree of imprecision in language is essential, otherwise we would have no means of speaking about what is new. On his view, language has an open-textured quality which enables us to apply it to new experience. But the greater the imprecision, the greater the demand on our powers of imagination and inarticulate judgement (*PK* 87ff).

The ideal of analytic philosophy is complete lucidity and precision for language. Polanyi’s theory shows that words, like the realities to which they refer, do not have such exactness. Words are ambiguous and their use as linguistic tools

is a skill that involves an element of personal judgement for which no handbook of formal rules is adequate. Words refer both to the real world *and to our experience of it*. They do not have sharply delimited meanings. To grasp the truth of a statement requires a tacit awareness of its context, and an ability to respond to it as a total person by integrating the words and the experience.<sup>5</sup> There is no strict coincidence between language and what it denotes. To embody an apprehension in words and sentences is not just a matter of processing data, it is an art, demanding skill and sensitivity. No two historical knowers have identical apprehensions. The meaning that forms in the mind is affected by past experience and by what we expect to see. Even variations in our linguistic resources can affect the way we apprehend an event or an object. Although we know more than we can tell, our speaking helps to clarify what we know. Experience is a complex interaction of language and event, of imagination and intention. Every apprehension is influenced by the way we articulate what we apprehend. Meaning is shaped by the simultaneous operation of imaginative insight and articulation. We do not first apprehend a matter and then look for words in which to embody the apprehension. The process is informalizable and almost instantaneous.

A word is a formal symbol, but its meaning lies in the mind's awareness of the pattern of relations it evokes. Words trail different threads of meaning for different people. Some minds are furnished with richer experience, for whom words carry richer overtones and produce more echoes. "It is," says Polanyi, "our personal participation that governs the richness of concrete experience to which our speech can refer" (PK 87). Words themselves also vary in the richness of their meaning, because the sum of properties implied in a term varies. Polanyi calls the implied attributes of a term its "intention" and identifies three successively deeper strata of "intentions" (PK 114-116).

First, there are readily specifiable properties which a class of things are known to share. Secondly, there are known but not readily specifiable properties. For example, we need to reflect on words like justice, truth or courage, if we are to come to a deeper understanding of the reality designated. To undertake an inquiry into the meaning of such words is justified only if we are confident that we can identify *empirically* what is just, true or courageous. Polanyi is here arguing that the study of linguistic rules is no substitute for the study of things referred to in its terms. He calls this practice "pseudo-substitution" (PK 113-114). We should not, for example, express disagreement on the nature of things as disagreement about the use of words. Language stands in relation to experience as scientific generalizations stand to empirical data. Words are generalizing symbolic creations of the mind that articulate *tacit* human experience of recurring features of reality. Through the centuries, writes Polanyi, "Words of great human significance accumulate...an unfathomable fund of subsidiarily known connotations, which we can bring partly into focus by reflecting on the use of such words" (PK 155). There is, thirdly, a deep level of intentions, formed by the indefinable range of anticipations we express when we designate something real, but whose subject matter remains largely hidden. "God" and his "Word" belong to this deepest of all strata of intentions.

To understand a descriptive term depends on the ability to grasp tacitly a pattern of relations or potential acts. The process involved in understanding a concept like justice, or the chain of reasoning in a mathematical theorem, is the same as for a simple concept like bread, only more elaborate. Each concept evokes an imaginative representation in consciousness, but concepts which draw on a wide range of associations form a slightly different picture for each hearer.

Most language has reference to the real world, but the symbols of pure mathematics and formal logic do not refer to any particular realities. Their significance lies chiefly in the use that can be made of them according to known rules (PK 85ff). To define the meaning of a word is to formalize its meaning by reducing its informal elements. Such

formalization can be highly fruitful, but is necessarily incomplete. Terms that have reference to a subject matter can only be defined up to a point and words with a highly inclusive application are virtually impossible to define.

Polanyi's theory of language seems to me to be of significance for theology, and particularly for the *Logos* doctrine, for several reasons. In the first place, his philosophy is a personalist metaphysic which never allows meaning and reality, the general and the particular, to fall apart. Only such a metaphysic provides the needed philosophical tools for thinking in a unitary and personalist way about the God-world relation--the relation between "the One" and "the many." His theory represents language as related directly to the reality it denotes. It accredits the bond between what a thing is in its inner being (ontology) and what it is in its external relations (epistemology). This is in sharp contrast to the positivist view which regards words (or theories) as related only *indirectly* to that to which they refer. Polanyi opposes linguistic and conceptual dualism by showing that knowing is a mode of being and recognizing this as the foundation of unitary thinking. Theologically, this validates the Christian claim that being is transformed through knowing and that revelation can be redemptive (*PK* 105). The gospel of God's self-revelation in Christ is held to be "Good News" largely because to hear and receive the message of his love and forgiveness is understood by Christians to be a receiving of God himself. God *is* his message. There is an inner relation between revelation and reconciliation, between knowing and being. The test of true knowing is a change in being--a "new creation." Reconciliation means God and man coming together in mutual "indwelling" or participation--an idea that is developed in Chapter 14 of St. John's Gospel.

Positivism in a variety of guises still ignores the participatory relation between epistemology and ontology, which is a central feature of Polanyi's epistemology. The theological counterpart of this is found in the relation between revelation and reconciliation. Polanyi's theory of language illuminates the doctrine of the incarnation because it is true to the structures of a personal order of reality. In the Incarnation, so Christians believe, God expressed himself directly through his living "Word." Theologically, the ground of unitary thinking lies in the nature of God, in whom is the coincidence of opposites referred to above. God is *one* in Being and Agency, one in Person, Word and Act. When God acts in self-revelation, he is himself his own self-revealing "Word." He and his Word are indivisible. In the Incarnation, he reveals himself, not through the words of a prophet, but in a particular Presence and life-style--a pattern of self-giving and forgiving that brings life out of death--a pattern that is both uniquely particular and universally significant, in which God and man share the same "personal space" through mutual indwelling, though they do not exist on the same *logical* level. In this union, the particular, historical Jesus (the "first-born of many brethren") represents the individual pole and the "Word incarnate" (the "only-begotten Son") represents the universal pole of a prototypical "I-Thou" relation.

Epistemologically, the tendency to think in terms of external, symbolic relations destroys the relation between reality and its intrinsic meaning, so that knowing cannot be a recognition of meaning inhering in the object, but is an external structure contributed by the mind. On this Kantian-type view, knowing has no inherent connection with being, nor can such a view justify the link between revelation and reconciliation. Polanyi's analysis of the structure of knowing affirms the identity of internal and external relations so that language is seen to share with knowing and being the same triadic and polar structure that we need to affirm of the knower-known relation. Polanyi shows that language functions in such a way that words have both a theoretical (subjective) and an empirical (objective) component and can equally be indwelt as a framework and explored as a meaning to be discovered. This "both-and" situation sets up an inevitable dialectic, which, on Polanyi's own showing, is triadic in structure.<sup>6</sup>

Polanyi not only stresses the inner relation that binds the speaker, his meaning and his words. He makes of the “word” a kind of sacrament of being and thus illuminates the doctrine of revelation by his use of the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge. Before the coming of Christ, knowledge of God--so it seems to Christians--was a tacit, non-articulate kind of knowledge lacking the clarity and concreteness of definition in personal terms provided by the Incarnation. In the past, God spoke to mankind in many ways and through many media. But in the Incarnation, the relation between God and his “Word”, between the tacit, inner relation and the explicit, self-revealing outer relation, came to be understood as coinciding in a way that cannot be claimed for human speech. When God became incarnate in Christ, it was as if a new language was born and people could articulate their tacit knowledge of God more clearly in the language of personhood, love and community. This “explicit” knowledge of God articulates the message through the power of transformed lives. Christianity’s central claim is that the coming of the “Word” brings with it an inner freedom and power to express the gospel, not in word only, since words alone do not transform, but in act and in being, through participation in the life of God in the Spirit. In my view, the message of Christianity defies comprehension, unless it is interpreted in terms of a personalist metaphysic or model, such as Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge (which is also a personalist ontology) provides.

## ENDNOTES

1. *Logos* is Greek for “word.” In the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel (John 1:14), Jesus is spoken of the Word of God who “became flesh.”

2. A sign is denotative, but is only meaningful by convention and has no built-in resemblance with that which it signifies. In one respect, sign-language is no different from ordinary language in the sense that each word is a “sign” for a particular object, idea, person or action and has to be learned. Like symbols, signs are a social phenomenon, arising out of the life and work of a society. But generally speaking, words are more appropriately thought of as “symbols” than as “signs”, since there is in words almost always some vital connection between the words used and that to which they refer.

3. See *PK* 113. On Polanyi’s view, positivism does for science what nominalism does for language; it sets a great divide between theory and substance, between thought and matter, between meaning and reality, between subjectivity and objectivity. Having done this, it identifies reality and objectivity with the material world and consigns such features of experience as thought, theory, and meaning to the realm of subjectivity. On this view, language, like all interpretative symbolism, is necessarily reduced to conventional status.

4. T. F. Torrance suggests that the fourth century Christian heresy called “Arianism” is the equivalent of nominalism in the philosophy of language. In drawing this parallel, he argues that the relation between persons and the language they use is, in the first place, an internal, ontological relation. According to Arianism, the “Son” (or *Logos*) differs from the “Father” in being. Their only relation is a moral one established contractually. Orthodox Christianity has always repudiated this idea, holding Jesus Christ to be the pre-existent *Logos* of God, who eternally shares his uncreated being and is of the same nature (Greek: *homoousion*, meaning “of one substance”). The Arian Christ reveals the Father, but stands in an external relation to him and is wholly on the created side of the divide. But according to main line Christianity, the Son reveals the Father because he *is* God, and because Father and Son are indivisibly one in being and agency. Without this understanding, the Son can only reveal the Father symbolically. In fact, the Western Church has tended to understand the relation in this way--severing the bond between reality and *Logos*, between being

and knowing, between what a thing is in its inner being and what it is in its external relations. This subtle form of epistemological and anthropological dualism turns the relation between God and his “Word” into an external relation which depends on arbitrary and transactional considerations. To think of God and Christ in this way is the theological counterpart of linguistic and conceptual dualism. On this view, God is one thing and Christ is another. This undermines the doctrine of God incarnate (the view that God manifested himself in his inner relations as “Word made flesh”), and also encourages a juridical view of the atonement. Unitary thinking requires acceptance of the *homoousion* doctrine, which sees the Father-Son (*Logos*) relation as inhering eternally within the one Being of God.

5. See J. H. Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 117.

6. Polanyi calls communication “a triad of triads” (*KB* 185). There are the partners in dialogue, whose speech functions as the “go-between”; there is the speaker, the reality to be communicated and the words that denote it; and there is the self, its conceptions and the language used to convey these.